The Interlanguage of Persian Learners of Italian: a Focus on Complex Predicates

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating the acquisition of Italian complex predicates by native speakers of Persian. Complex predication is not as pervasive a phenomenon in Italian as it is in Persian. Yet Italian native speakers use complex predicates productively; spontaneous data show that Persian learners of Italian seem to be perfectly aware of Italian complex predicates and use this familiar feature as a bridge between their native language (NL) and the target language (TL). Elicitation of complex predicates in guided context seems to indicate that the Persian group learners' group is strikingly uniform to the Native Speakers' group and quite homogeneous with the control group of learners with NL other than Persian. This research shows that the use of complex predicates in Italian Interlanguage (IL) cannot be considered a simple effect of transfer, but could be also analyzed as a more general IL strategy.

Key terms: Second Language Acquisition, Italian, Modern Persian, Complex Predicates

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1. Complex Predicates in Persian and Italian

Complex predicates (CPs) have received considerable attention in recent years, as they are a phenomenon in between morphology, syntax and lexicon. They can be defined "As predicates which are multi-headed; they are composed of more than one grammatical element (either morphemes or words), each of which contributes part of the information ordinarily associated with a head" (Alsina, Bresnan and Sells 1997: 1).

Persian CPs constitute a typological feature of the verbal system: "in addition to simple verbs, Persian employs a large number of complex predicates consisting of a preverbal element and a light verb. The preverbal element can be a noun, an adjective, an adverb or a preposition phrase, which combines with a verb to form a single syntactic predicate" (Megerdoomian 2001: 97; see also Folli, Harley and Karimi 2005, Megerdoomian 2002a; for a reference grammar of Persian, see Lambton 1953, Lazard 1957 and Mahootian 1997). According to Dabir-Moghaddam (1997) complex verb formation was already highly productive in Early Modern Persian; in Contemporary Persian the use of complex predication is the dominant strategy. This is particularly evident with new loan words; in fact all new loan words are used as verbs through combination with a light verb as in *faeks kaerdaen* (Engl. *fax do*: 'to fax') (Megerdoomian 2002b).

Italian shows a rather different situation: verbs are normally synthetic in nature (though often exhibiting productive and semi-transparent derivational morphology); therefore complex predicates are treated as exceptions and have not yet received a systematic account - if at all

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recognized. Recent literature indicates that effort has been made to fill this gap, especially with regard to complex predicates with nominal elements (Alba-Salas 2004; Jezek 2004; Mastrofini 2004, 2005) and verb-particle predication (Masini 2005; Iacobini and Masini 2007). By way of illustration, Italian light verbs with a nominal element are quite frequent, but their status in the verbal lexicon is far from being paradigmatic: we can have *telefonare* (Engl. *to phone/call*) and *fare una telefonata* (Engl. *to make a call*), but also either only a simple predicate (SP), like *riuscire* (Engl. *to succeed*) or only complex formations as *avere fame* (Engl. *to be hungry*).

Since Persian and Italian differ with respect to CPs, we are interested in how Persian learners of Italian perceive them, whether as a normal part of the Italian verbal system, or not. CPs may behave as a bridge between two languages which show different patterns.

2. Spontaneous Data – Qualitative Analysis

In the first phase of this research, a collection of spontaneous data was taken into account consisting of emails and text messages written by Persian speaking adult Iranians learning Italian. The informants are students aged between 25 to 30 who moved to Italy from Iran for their Ph.D. None of them had studied Italian in their home country, and all were fluent in English.

The texts are free productions, gathered over a period of 1.5 years. The analysis was intended to trace the impact of Persian on the interlanguage of the informants, both in the choice of complex vs simple predicate strategy and in the specific preference for NL-like light verbs vs TL-like ones.

Here follows a list of interesting examples of CP use in the sample:

(1) **IL** *Io ti sto aspettando per mangiare collazione fuori*

       I you am waiting   for eating   breakfast out

       'I'm waiting for you to eat breakfast out'

    TL *fare colazione*   (CP – lit. 'do breakfast')

    NL *sobhaaneh khordan*   (CP - lit. 'eat breakfast')

the learner chooses the verb that matches their NL form *khordan*, instead of using the more general but TL-correct form *fare*, because NL *kardan* (which would correspond to Italian *fare*) is not allowed for experience eventualities;

(2) **IL** *vado a prendere duccia*

       I.go to take   shower

       'I'm going to take a shower'

    TL *fare la doccia*   (CP - lit. 'do the shower')

    NL *doosh gereftan*

the learner produces a lexical transfer of their NL CP form, probably derived from French *prendre la douche* (cfr. English *take a shower*);

(3) **IL** *se vuoi mangiamo la cena insieme*

       if you.want we.eat   the dinner together

       'If you want we can dine together'

    TL *cenare*   (SP - lit. 'to dine')

    NL *naahaar khordan* (CP - lit. 'eat dinner')

here the entire structure of the NL is transferred to the TL, which has only an SP;

(4) **IL** *poi ci   vediamo a fare la   cena*

      then each other we.see   to do   the dinner

      'Then we can meet for dinner'

    TL *cenare*   (SP - lit. 'dine')

    NL *naahaar khordan*   (CP - lit. 'eat dinner')

this example differs from (3) because in this case the abstract CP structure is transferred, but the light verb is chosen in analogy with TL *fare colazione* (cfr. (1));

(5) **IL** *puoi   immaginare che senso sento adesso*

      you.can imagine   what sense I.feel   now

      'You can imagine how I feel now'

    TL *sentirsi*   (SP - reflexive form of the verb *to feel*)

    NL *ehsaas kardan*   (CP - lit. 'sense do')

in this case (the speaker is commenting on the boring lesson they are supposed to attend in one hour) IL shows the form *sentire senso* (with the meaning *to feel*) in which the complex structure is a transfer from NL, but the light verb root is taken from TL SP *sentirsi*;

(6) **IL** *ho   un po' fame*

      I.have a bit hunger

      'I'm a bit hungry'

    TL *avere fame*   (CP - lit. 'have hunger')

    NL *gorosneh boodan*   (copula construction - lit. 'be hungry')

in this case the NL shows a copula construction; Italian allows the copula construction (*essere affamato*), but this is not synonymous with the CP, which is the default strategy; the IL shows a preference for the CP;

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(7) **IL** *chiamami   se   hai   voglia*

          call.me   if   you.have want

          'Call me if you want'

    TL *avere voglia*   (CP - lit. 'have want' vs. SP *volere* - lit. 'want')

    NL *khaastan*   (SP – 'want')

here the NL has only an SP; Italian allows both the SP and the CP; the learner chooses the CP;

(8) **IL** *sono contento che ho deciso   male a andare a Bremen*

          I.am happy   that I.have decided bad   to go   to Bremen

          'I'm happy that I have decided wrongly in planning my trip to Bremen'

    TL *sbagliarsi*   (SP - lit. 'to mistake')

    NL *eshtebaah kardan*   (CP - lit. 'make wrong')

the learner produces an original construction; the abstract choice of a CP structure is NL-like (TL has SP), but both the verbal and the preverbal elements of the new lexical unit do not correspond to their counterparts in the Persian semantic equivalent; in this case there is no reason to assume a specific interference of the native lexical structure determining the production in IL; it is more plausible to hypothesize a general transfer of an abstract strategy of information "packaging".

To summarize, the productions of complex predicates in the Italian Interlanguage of Persians can be classified with the following grid (corresponding example number is given in parenthesis):

A. a CP in IL corresponds to a CP in both NL and TL:

    i.   the selected light verb is NL-like (1);

    ii. the CP in IL could also be the effect of interference from

another L2 (2);

B. a CP in IL is used instead of the TL-correct SP in cases where NL presents a CP:

    i.   simple transfer of NL light verb (3);

    ii. overextension of TL light verb used in similar TL-CP (4);

    iii. IL CP is a new formation with light verb derived from TL SP (5);

C. non-CP in NL corresponds to CP in TL:

    i.   TL only has the CP, NL has a copula construction; IL shows no problems in producing the correct CP (6);

    ii. TL has both an SP and a CP, NL only has an SP; IL selects the CP form (7);

D. CP is a new formation which does not mirror either NL or TL (8).

The data described here show a great variety of CP examples; not all of them can be considered as cases of calque. In many cases the learners choose a different light verb, although the TL equivalent of the NL light verb is known. Not always is this light verb TL-like either. Some cases are utterly new formations, which do not find any comparable correspondence either in NL or in TL. In the most extreme case (7) the learners prefer the CP strategy over the SP one, even where the NL has a single verb only.

These observations allowed the authors to formulate the following hypothesis: that productive complex predication is an abstract linguistic feature, not only a characteristic of single predicates, and as such, it is subject to be transferred as a whole to the L2, when this gives evidence of possessing a similar feature.

3. Experiment - Semi-guided Elicitation of CPs

In order to experimentally test the hypothesis, a questionnaire consisting of images was submitted to three groups of informants. Images were taken from comics and showed either a single cartoon or multiple cartoon scenes.

Informants were asked to give a written description in Italian of each cartoon.

We submitted the same questionnaires to the three different groups:

- 6 Persian native speakers (PNS) who lived in Italy and spoke Italian as an L2;
- 6 Italian native speakers (INS);
- 21 non native speakers of Italian, having an L1 other then Persian (NNS).

The goal of this experiment was to check whether the PNS group differs from the two control groups (native speakers and other learners of Italian) for what concerns the occurrence and the type of complex predicates. First some qualitative observations concerning the productions of the PNS were presented; a quantitative statistical analysis follows.

3.1. Some Qualitative Observations

In this paragraph some qualitative observations on the production of CPs by the Persian group are discussed. This discussion aims at finding out the similarities between guided and spontaneous data (see par. 2).

The number of CPs produced does not seem to vary according to the competence level of the informants. For instance they all produce a very

common TL CP with no SP equivalent in TL:

(9) *fare   il   bagno / far-si   il   bagno*
    make   the   bath   make-REFL   the   bath
    'take a bath'

the two less advanced informants are more productive in creating non TL-like CPs:

(10) *dare scontrino*
    give   receipt
    'give the receipt'

the CP status here is due to lack of article, and therefore arguable, but the informant normally uses the articles with a TL-like distribution;

(11) *dare il   codice*
    give   the   code
    'enter the code'

the informant produces a new CP in IL, which is licit in Italian (*dare* looses its trivalent valency scheme), which is not used by Italian informants, who select the SP *digitare*, followed by *il codice*;

(12) *preso la   freddore*
    taken   the   cold
    'got a cold'

this example shows a TL-like CP preferred over SP equivalent (*raffreddarsi*).

    The two intermediate informants produce common TL CPs with no SP equivalents in TL, like:

(13) *fare la   spesa*
  do the shopping
  'go shopping'

(14) *avere un'idea*
  have an idea
  'have an idea'

(15) *fare il   giro*
  make the tour
  'patrol'

and show a preference for the CP structure where both CP and SP are available in TL:

(16) *dare un colpo*
  give a hit
  'hit'

TL-like CP with SP equivalent in TL *(colpire)*;

(17) *prendere sonno*
  take sleep
  'fall asleep'

TL-like CP with SP equivalent in TL *(addormentarsi)*.

  The two least advanced informants produce a greater variety of CP structures, with no SP equivalent in TL:

(18) *avere problemi con lo   stomaco*
  have problems with the stomach
  'feel sick'

(19) *essere in coda*

    be   in queue

    'queue'

(20) *fare linguacce*

    make tongues

    'put one's tongue out'

3.2. Results and Statistics

For each questionnaire the sum of all instances of predication were counted. Among those, the CPs were isolated, further distinguishing (for the non native groups PNS and NNS) those who did not correspond to a form existing in the Italian language. The results in the following table show that the relative number of complex predicates does not differ in the three groups (around 10%):

Table 1. Instances of predication for the three groups of informants

	Total predicates	Total CPs		Non target-like CPs	
PNS (6)	263	28	11%	6	2%
INS (6)	274	29	10%	-	-
NNS (21)	820	86	10%	21	2%

To verify the significance of these distributions a Chi-Square test was used, in order to check the homogeneity of the three samples. The result of the test is that for p=0.05 we cannot reject the null hypothesis, that is, the distribution of CPs and non CPs in the PNS sample is not significantly

different from the distribution in the other samples: this means that, with a degree of certainty of 95%, we have no elements to consider the three samples significantly different. The latter is also true if we compare the amount of non target like CPs in Persian vs. non Persian L2 informants.

In other words, the distribution of the CPs in our test does not seem to correlate with the native language of the informants.

4. Discussion

In the spontaneous data the authors observed a preference of Persian learners of Italian for the CP strategy. This is probably due to a transfer from NL, which leads them to produce either new CP formations (ex. 5, 8), or to choose CPs already existing in TL (ex. 6, 7). Clearly this tendency is mirrored out especially by CPs in IL which correspond to a SP in TL (ex. 3, 4, 5, 8).

Data were then collected from the questionnaires in order to evaluate the hypothesis in quantitative terms. Most of the informants' productions were instances of CPs which did not have a SP in Italian they were either very frequent, like *fare il / un bagno, avere un'idea*, or less frequent, like *fare linguacce*. Nevertheless, we also found a preference for the CP strategy, where both CP and SP are available in TL (ex. 16-17), and cases of new CP formations which only partially correspond to TL CPs, like *dare il codice* (ex. 11), or not at all, as for *dare scontrino* (ex. 10).

Learners differ from each other with respect to their competence and this is reflected not in the quantity (each learner produces a comparable

amount of CPs), but in the quality of their productions: low level learners show new formations, the intermediate learners produced the most common CPs, while the advanced learners showed a broader variety of CPs.

Compared to the INS control group, the PNS group produced a slightly higher number of CPs. However our empirical investigation by questionnaires showed that the production of CPs by Persian informants was not statistically different from the production of other L2 learners and of natives.

5. Conclusion

The striking homogeneity of CP production in numbers and in form between the three groups could be a result of the experiment structure. In other words, the images in the experiment could be triggering some semantic settings that make the use of a CP strategy more likely. Some researchers have verified how the aspectual/actional function is carried by the two elements (see Karimi-Doostan 1997; Megerdoomian 2008); still it would be interesting to investigate if some relevant classes of eventualities are more likely to be expressed by the entire CP structure, both in learners and in natives. Our data suggest that at least for habitual activities or punctual actions this seems to be true.

Alternatively, the productive use of CPs by both Persian and non-Persian learners has to be investigated with respect to its significance in acquisition: since in CPs elements are functionally split - the light verb mostly carrying the grammatical functions, while the other element the

lexical-semantic content - this can easily meet the tendency towards the structural simplification normally found in IL. It would also be interesting to verify whether this phenomenon emerges in particular in language contact over different periods of time, as could be the case for instance for Persian.

Both the theoretical and methodological issues here stated need further investigation.

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Abbreviations:

CP	Complex Predicate
IL	Interlanguage
INS	Italian Native Speakers
NL	Native Language
NNS	non native speakers of Italian, having an L1 other than Persian
PNS	Persian Native Speaker
REFL	Reflexive
SP	Simple Predicate
TL	Target Language